

Discussion Questions

KEVIN TOTH

Now that you've finished the novel, use the following questions to strengthen your understanding of the text or to spark discussion amongst your class or book club.

1. Many of the events in the novel blur the distinction between virtue and immorality. Is such a distinction important? In your opinion, who are the "good" characters and who are the "bad" characters? Who are the "good" people and "bad" people in your own life?

2. Why is the time period of the novel appropriate for the narrative? How would the novel's events have played out in a different era? Can you use a bow and arrow effectively?

3. The many wants and needs of the characters fuel much of the novel's plot. Are these characters lacking in self-control, or have they coped admirably with their circumstances? Do you detect a common denominator among the needs and wants of the novel's male characters in spite of their disparate motivations? What about the female characters? The non-human characters? Do you need to be asked if you detected similarities or differences in the wants and needs of characters belonging to different races, or is that the sort of thing that you can infer from the questions already asked? Is it something you would have thought about anyway? Did any characters' wants and

needs seem more realistic than others? Did any characters' wants and needs seem trivial or foolish compared to your own?

4. The novel contains a number of references to religion, including radical proposals for standards of living, debates on the origins of life, and several characters being mistaken for divine emissaries. Does religion help or hinder the characters in the novel? In which cases? Why? What would you do if someone said otherwise? What would you do if someone proved otherwise?

5. The distinction between having and not having is important to the novel, with the services and products purchased and owned practically comprising a whole separate character. Considering that a majority of the novel's minor characters often go without food, shelter, or indoor plumbing, what is the effect of these details about ownership? How much do you own? Too much? Not enough? The correct amount? What are you basing your answer on? What is your most treasured possession? How would your life be different if it were to disappear, or if you had never owned it in the first place? What about your second most treasured possession? Would your life be bearable without it? What about your third, fourth, fifth, and sixth most treasured possessions? What if you were robbed? What if your house burned down? Would you be ready? Where would you turn? Who could you trust? Wouldn't it be better to know that there was someone looking out for you? (This discussion question was sponsored by the Chubb Group of insurance companies.)

6. Does any genuine love occur between the characters in the novel? Between the characters and their families? Between the characters and their belongings? Between the characters and their pets? Why or why not? Of the numerous things you've lost or been denied during your life, which did you want the most? How did you feel when you realized it would never be yours? What sort of physical pain would you compare it to? Did you ever get over it? Seriously? What songs did you listen to during these periods of disappointment? Did you try to replace your foiled desire with something else? If so, with what? Did you try counseling? Did you try to tell yourself that you were better off without whatever it was you wanted, or that it just wasn't that important in the long run, or that you were a better, wiser person as a result of your frustration and heartbreak? Did you believe yourself when you said these things? Honestly? Why were you unable to obtain what you wanted? Was the situation beyond your control, or, looking back, was there something more you could have done? As a quick exercise, make a list of your shortcomings. How many of these shortcomings can you change? How many are you stuck with? Less than half? More than half? All of them? If you can change some of them, why haven't you? Is laziness one of your shortcomings? Some of the novel's characters have few problems getting what they want. How does this make you feel? Were you able to relate to these characters, or did you find yourself wishing that their lives were more like yours? What songs do you think the different characters would enjoy listening to? Some of the characters romantic relationships are happy, constructive, and mutually fulfilling on a number of levels. Does that strike you as unrealistic? Did some of the characters just bug the

living shit out of you? Were these the “bad” characters, or were some of the “good” characters equally insufferable? Who are the people in your own life who just bug the living shit out of you? Where would you send those people if you could? Would you ever consider having them eliminated altogether? What if we told you that we knew a guy? (For more information, visit the publisher’s website or mail in the coupon found in the back of this book.)

7. The novel is populated by numerous characters that have no bearing on the plot whatsoever. Why did the author decide to include these seemingly unnecessary characters? To elevate the important characters? Or strictly for comic relief? Are you important? What is the most embarrassing thing that ever happened? Did the people around you laugh? With you, or at you? Have you considered that your embarrassing situation is now a story that those other people tell their friends at parties? Would you call them “good” people or “bad” people? Do you tell those sorts of stories at parties? Do you tell your friends about your embarrassing stories, or the embarrassing stories of others? When you cross the road at a crosswalk, do you think that the people waiting in their stopped cars are wondering how many points they would receive for running you over? Do you assign point values to the pedestrians that pass in front of your car? How many points would you be worth? How many points would your parents give you? How many points would your coworkers give you? What about your spouse? Or your children? Do you have a spouse or children? Do you think that whether or not you have a spouse or children should have any bearing on your point value? Why or why not? Throughout the

novel, numerous characters are shot, stabbed, tortured, dismembered, crushed, or blown to pieces. Sometimes they take their own lives or are wiped out wholesale in political conflicts, religious conflicts, economic conflicts, or what reputable insurance companies refer to as Acts of God. Were the important characters elevated by these deaths? Did the deaths of these peripheral characters affect your reading of the novel, or not at all?

8. How does the author keep the reader amused throughout the novel's considerable length? Were these narrative devices effective? Should there have been a few more Acts of God? Were the special effects convincing?

9. The characters in the novel live under considerable clouds of misinformation. Would a better understanding of the world around them have kept their lives trouble-free? Would quality insurance plans have kept their lives worry-free? Do you consider yourself well educated? Do you consider yourself intelligent? What are you worried about?

10. In spite of its many realist and naturalist trappings, the novel contains a fair number of postmodern features, including a narrator who constantly reminds the reader that there is only so much of the novel than can be understood, and that all of the characters are eventually going to die. Why is the reader compelled to keep reading? Would you have preferred something more straightforward and plot-driven? How do the numerous novels within the novel affect your

reading experience or understanding of the text? What about your understanding of the text of the novels within the novel? Should the novels within the novel contain a reading guide and discussion questions? How many questions should be asked? Which questions? Why? Would you use this reading guide as a model? Has this reading guide been helpful? Do you feel that you've gotten your money's worth? Does postmodernism still have a few shreds of validity, or is it all pretty much played out? Why or why not?

11. The novel's ending leads many readers to ask, "what if?" Do you consider this a satisfying conclusion? Why or why not? If you had to read the novel over again, is there anything that you would change or do differently? What would you change if you were the one writing the novel? Speculate about the futures of the various characters. Do the novel's final lines suggest anything concrete about their respective fates?□